

## THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

Gentlemen, if it had not been announced to you, both in the notices convening this meeting and in the public prints, that the President would address the Society this evening, I should only too gladly remain silent; being satisfied that in the two Reports to which you have just listened all that need be said of the past year has been said. For the subject, as it seems to me, of an address from the President of such a Society as this, at the end of his year of office, should be a review of the history of the Society during that year. But when I saw the exhaustive Report which the Hon. Secretary had drawn up for the Council, and which has just been presented to this meeting, I felt, like "the needy knifegrinder," that I had no story to tell. Very little remains for me to say except to congratulate the Society upon its present position. It is about a year old. I am not quite sure whether the day of the first preliminary meeting, the 4th of November 1877, or January 21st in 1878, the meeting at which Rules were made and Officers appointed, should be called the birthday of the Society: probably the latter; and in that case it has not yet quite reached its first anniversary. But the baby is alive and well. It has survived some of the dangers of infancy; it has not been smothered by kindness, nor left to perish from neglect; it has not been starved, as the Treasurer's report shews; and it has shewn itself capable of performing most of the functions which were expected of it.

We must all feel that the Report of the Council gives sufficient ground for the opinion that the Society is vigorous. Nine meetings held in the year:—twenty-two papers read:—one number of the Journal published, and a second almost ready for publication:—a library commenced:—160 members enrolled:—and last, though not least, a balance at the Bank: all these are healthy signs, and give us reason to hope that the Society is well established, and has a long and useful career before it.

Some of the papers that have been read are of very great value. I may mention as an instance Mr. Maclay's account of his long wanderings among the wild tribes of the Peninsula. He has fixed with a precision which only personal investigation on the spot could secure, both the *habitat* of each division of these scattered tribes, and the relation in which they stand to one another, and to other races. Every one who reads his most interesting paper must, I think, come to the same conclusions as Mr. Maclay himself, that, though

called by different names in different localities, these tribes are all of one race, of Melanesian type; and that the difference, both in physical characteristics and manners and customs, between those who seem most unlike one another, such as the Orang Sakei Liar and the Orang Mantra of Ayer Salah, is only the effect of intermarriage with some of the more civilized races of the coast and the adoption of certain of their usages. We may esteem ourselves fortunate to have been entrusted with the publication in English of this most important contribution to ethnological science, the fruit of Mr. Maclay's labours and privations, which have unhappily resulted in very serious loss of health to that distinguished traveller himself.

Another of last year's papers that requires some special notice is the Revd. J. Perham's account of the Mengap, or Song of the Dyak Head Feast. It appeared first in the columns of the Sarawak Gazette, but the Council has been glad to give it a more permanent place in literature by printing it again in the forthcoming number of the Journal. It is a kind of contribution to our knowledge of such races as the Dyaks of Borneo which ought to be easily obtained. Missionaries, who are engaged in planting Christianity, should have the desire, as they have the opportunity, of informing themselves accurately respecting the nature of those religious ideas and beliefs which they are trying to supersede. And as the Mission in Sarawak has been diligent and successful in making converts to Christianity, so I trust it will be careful to preserve a record of that which will rapidly pass away under its influence,—the imperfect and childish efforts of an untaught people to "feel after God if haply they may find Him." Communications on this subject will, I feel sure, be always most gladly received by this Society, whoever may be for the time conducting its affairs.

Another paper to which I will venture to draw special attention is Mr. W. E. Maxwell's collection of Malay Proverbs, of which the first portion was printed in the first number of the Journal, and a second portion will appear in the next. Certainly, some of these Proverbs shew a depth of worldly wisdom and a pungency of wit with which many of us, who have only a superficial knowledge of the Malay, would not have credited him. And they also give us an insight into his character, and his ways of looking upon the world about him, which could hardly be afforded us so well by any other means.

The last paper that I will mention is the translation Mr. Pickering has given us of the Chinese legendary account of the origin of their Secret Societies. This is to be followed I hope by some further information concerning the condition of these Societies, their manner of working, and their influence for good or evil in Singapore from the same high authority. It is probable that an exposure of their practices will relieve Europeans from some ill-grounded fears as to the objects and action of these associations, and that, by having them deprived of their character of secrecy, the Chinese themselves may be induced to use them, as they well may, for mutual benefit only, giving up what ideas of aggression on the rights of others may still be involved in them.

The General meetings, at which these and the other papers have been read, have not perhaps been so well attended as we might have wished; but I think those who have been generally or frequently present at them have found them a most agreeable break in the monotony of Colonial life. The truth of the old saying, *magna civitas magna solitudo*, is very keenly felt in Singapore; for our city, though it is not great in numbers, is great in area, and men who may have much to communicate to, or to learn from one another, are likely to meet very rarely, unless there are fixed times and places of meeting.

But I doubt whether our meetings will be as frequent in the future as they have been in the past year. I mention this now because I think, if it turns out to be the case, we must look upon it, not as a sign of retrogression, but as a thing that must in the nature of things happen. No doubt one thing that encouraged some of the original promoters of the Society to endeavour to get it established was the consciousness that they had a certain accumulation of information and even of M.S. which was sufficient to give the Society a start. But we have drawn very largely upon that stock during the year, and may expect to find that papers for meetings are not quite so abundant as they were. New matter will of course be coming in; but all the members without exception who are at all likely to be contributors are busy men, who have but few hours of leisure to devote to science and literature outside their own particular calling. And though I hope we may be able to keep up our two numbers of the Journal in the year, I do very much doubt whether we shall be able to get a meeting more than once in two months instead of once a month as hitherto.

There is one part of the scheme of work we planned for ourselves last year which has not begun to be accomplished. I mean the formation of a collection of Malay literature. When I think of the dangers which so many of the few Malay MSS. and books that exist are now running, I feel that there is no time to be lost in setting about this business in earnest. Think of these precious volumes in the keeping of native owners who have no idea of their value. Think of them also even when they are in the hands of appreciative European collectors; of one precious, unique MS. in a bachelor-residence somewhere in the interior of Perak: another perhaps in a Singapore hotel: another here, another there, scattered everywhere, in danger of white ants, of fire, of careless servants, encountering daily one or all of these risks. When I think of it I tremble for them, and most heartily wish they were safe under lock and key, in the possession of our Society.

There are three ways in which possession of them may be acquired; by gift, by loan for copying, or by purchase. Surely we ought to be able either to beg, borrow, or buy them. I think while we have money it would be a most useful way of spending some of it, if we were either to purchase such Malay books as are to be bought, or pay for having copies made of such as may be entrusted to us for that purpose.—But of course it would be better still to receive them as gifts; and as example is more forcible than precept, I here and now offer for the acceptance of the Society my own much valued copy of the *Hikayat Abdullah*.

We may thankfully record the fact that the Society has had no losses by death, and few by departure during the year. One serious loss was that of the Hon. John Douglas, the late Colonial Secretary of this Colony. He was a most valuable member of the Council, and was much interested in the welfare and progress of the Society. But as the loss to us was a gain to him we perhaps ought not to regret it. The timely return of Mr. Hervey to Singapore gave the Council an opportunity of filling up the vacancy in their body by appointing another of the original promoters of the Society to succeed Mr. Douglas.

And now, gentlemen, it only remains for me and the other members of the Council to lay down the charge with which you have entrusted us, and ask you to proceed to the election of our successors.